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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses various concepts of tokenism and argues that tokenism is a technique used by the dominant group to resist minority group pressures for change. Reasons for social scientists' neglect of tokenism are given, and those conceptualizations which do appear in the literature are examined. Tokenism is described as a strategy to diffuse conflict and/or coopt potential minority leaders, and a token figure may be employed to manage the impossible or to be blamed for failure. The dilemmas of the token role are presented as it affects both the token and the members of his respective group. Using the university as an illustrative source, the paper also characterizes the major aspects of the token role as a basis for further research and analyses. (Author/JCD)

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TOKENISM AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE: A Theoretical Examination of An Aspect of Race Relations in Educational Context*

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Introduction

Tokenism has rarely been analyzed theoretically or studied empirically, although it is a familiar term in the everyday world and even in some sociological treatments of racism (see for example Alvarez, Lutterman and Associates 1979: 215, 383, 392; Killian 1974; and Wilson 1973: 123). A clarification of the concept is in order for theoretical and applied purposes: to extend race relations theory, aid in the transformation of public policy, and contribute to the resolution of problems of societal injustice such as university desegregation. Here we will suggest hypotheses to explain the neglect of tokenism, consider definitions that have been proposed, and present an ideal type of the token role. Illustrative examples will be drawn from the university setting.

Some caveats are necessary. This paper is not a report of empirical research. On the contrary it is a state-of-the-art examination of some theory germane, in our opinion, to educational policy and practice; an elucidation and refinement of concepts in educational and race relations theory prior to formulating problems and implementing systematic proposals.

Our intent is to push theoretical analysis beyond mere explanation of race-related problems in universities toward the exposure of structures and policies in need of change. For we believe that the preeminent effect of the politics of desegregation within many institutions of higher education is the transmission and maintenance of minority subordination. So, explanation unaccompanied by the will to act demeans the mandate of the social theorist.

It is assumed, also, that racial subordination--in myriad, flexible and resilient, forms--persists flagrantly in our institutions of higher education. It seems clear that after a relatively brief period of "liberation" predominantly White universities are closing the door to minority faculty, administrators and students. According to one observer (Marable 1980) in 1974-75, for example, 7.5 percent of all freshmen at medical schools were African American. By 1976-77, the figure was 6.8 percent; it is lower today. Predominantly White universities like the University of California at Berkeley have aggressively limited the number of tenure-track African American faculty and have denied tenure to African Americans in disproportionate numbers. African American undergraduate enrollment at Berkeley dropped from 1400 in 1972 to 700 in 1977, and is projected at roughly 350 by 1983. While such neo-conservative shifts were occurring in institutions of higher education, opposition to the structure of racism--especially that from the African American community--was in apparent disarray (see Reed 1979 and Marable 1981). A critical theory of liberation centrally involving racism with organizational change, and a strategy of action, was not at hand. This paper is addressed to this lack of strategies of action based on theoretical analyses of racism, sexism and organizational change.

The theme underlying the argument of the paper is that tokenism is a technique of resistance to change in the relationships between dominant and minority groups. Where race is involved, it is an attempt to maintain patterns of racial dominance the stability of which is threatened. We perceive tokenism as an essential element in the ideological hegemony of the institutional process of racism.

Why the Neglect of Tokenism

Since knowledge is rooted in social history, we need to understand why neither dominant nor minority group social scientists have studied tokenism in depth and why, at the same time, there tends to be instant comprehension when the term is introduced into discussions of race relations. The reasons for this lack of disciplined attention are different in respective cases, we believe. Among members of racial minority groups tokenism is a self-evident, taken-for-granted notion--so obvious that it may be skipped as a research topic. In contrast, the developing scholarship on gender roles has provided important formulations, probably because women have only recently become aware of their roles as tokens (Kanter 1977; Laws 1975).

Members of dominant groups may logically be expected to ignore or deny the existence of tokenism. Perpetuation of the ideology that achievement is based on individual effort and universalistic criteria helps to support the established order. Minority group members are encouraged to upgrade their ability and become "qualified." A person serving as token is seen as someone who has made it up through the system, official demonstration that the system works. Here, as elsewhere in the sociology of race relations, policy interests strongly direct avenues of research and non-research.

Neo-Marxist sociologists fail to consider the significance of tokenism for perhaps two reasons--their partiality for macro rather than micro sociology and their assumption that reformist measures, such as Affirmative Action, are not worth serious consideration (see for example Gil 1980). Our point of view is pragmatic; we believe it essential to learn how racism becomes embedded and perpetuated in complex organizational

systems such as universities, governmental establishments and corporations, and to discover the specific forms taken in resistance to change.

Conceptualism of Tokenism

We shall examine conceptualizations of tokenism that have appeared in the literature and, in a later section, two closely related concepts--cooptation and marginality.

There is agreement that for tokenism to appear there must be a condition of previous discrimination or subordination by one group, the dominants, over another group, the minority (Cobb & Elder 1972; Laws 1975). The latter has been barred from access to certain rights and privileges, including occupational or educational statuses (Wirth 1945). As the minority group exerts pressure for change, conflict may escalate or new forms of accommodation be required. Tokenism appears in the form of some concession, as a show of change. An early and common ploy is to provide discontented groups with symbolic rewards or reassurances, such as formal acceptance of petitions or grievances (Cobb & Elder 1972). If this does not suffice, more concrete actions are necessary, such as acting on a limited grievance in a larger problem. Semi-competent African American instructors, for example, may be selected deliberately over better qualified African American candidates by the White faculty and administrators in order to influence the development and legitimacy of the curriculum of Black Studies within the contextual framework of universities (Marable 1980: 195).

Limited or superficial change can usually be observed quantitatively. Kanter ties her definition of the token to numbers, as follows:

> Skewed groups are those in which there is a large preponderance of one type over another, up to a ratio of perhaps 85:15. The numerically dominant types also control the group and its culture in enough ways to be labelled "dominants." The few of another type in a skewed group can appropriately be called "tokens." (1977: 208)

In examining the effects of relative numbers on behavior, Kanter focuses on tokenism in organizational settings. In her formulation, the dominant type is numerically greater and controls the group and its culture. We see the latter characteristic as crucial, especially in societal-wide situations such as colonialism, where numbers do not, in themselves, insure dominance. Kanter agrees with other writers that tokenism is self-perpetuating and, unchallenged, does not lead to further change (Kanter 1977: 210).

In colorful language, a minority group activist focuses more directly on the purposes of selecting tokens and the consequences for their group. Tokenism is, according to Baraka (writing then as Jones):

> . . . the setting up of social stalemates or the extension of meager privilege to some few "selected" Negroes [sic] in order that a semblance of compromise or "progress" or a lessening in racial repression might seem to be achieved, while actually helping to maintain the status quo just as rigidly. . . . (Jones 1961: 73)

Tokenism As a Stage

These definitions highlight the fact that tokenism is an action taken to forestall more significant change, a form of dominant group accommodation. Tokenism probably occurs when more repressive means are failing and conflict escalates in spite of them. The strategy is to defuse the existing or potential conflict by concessions, and/or to coopt potential minority leaders. Such persons and their groups may be temporarily placated but the nature of tokenism is such that the token

will prove unworthy of advancement.

As an example, the urban rebellions of the late 1960s, following upon the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, gave cause for alarm. African Americans were bringing unprecedented pressure for change on the dominant group. Affirmative Action measures became a vehicle through which the government transmitted these pressures to discriminating educational institutions and business firms, requiring concrete reaction. Paradoxically, the institutionalization of various procedures provided new bureaucratic mechanisms for evasion. Massive amounts of paperwork could be accumulated to demonstrate that efforts at minority recruitment had been made. However, tokens were also selected for purposes of show and display.

Their placement was in contrast to a practice observed by Hughes at an earlier stage (1958). He noted that Black entrants into new occupational positions were located out of the sight of the public. This occurred when pressures from the group resulted in the gesture of hiring, but the public was not yet believed ready for contact.

Tokenism may also occur at particular stages in organizational history. Once an organizational system is precariously balanced, for instance, a token may be employed to manage the impossible or be blamed for failure. Thus we note the appointment of African American school superintendents in declining urban public school systems. Finally, and from a different perspective, tokenism may be a stage in mass movement dynamics. Thus, as the commitment to combat racism eased into the malaise of the 1970s, and deepened into the cultural wastelands of the present tokenism may decrease and reversion to more flagrant racist policies and practices can occur more freely.

This discussion as well as some of the definitions quoted point to dilemmas of the token role.

Dilemmas of the Token Role

The small literature on tokens veers between sympathy for the individual placed in a difficult and stressful position and disdain for those who can be coopted into the role.

Students of school desegregation have focused on its consequences for the African American child. Pettigrew, for example, deals with the effect of numbers in effecting desegregation:

> Tokenism is psychologically difficult for black children. Without the numbers to constitute a critical mass, black students can come to think of themselves as an unwanted appendage, and white students can overlook the black presence and even perceive it as a temporary situation. But once the minority percentage reaches about 20 to 25%, black students become a significant part of the school to stay. They are now numerous enough to be filtered throughout the entire school structure, and on the newspaper staff, and in the honor society as well as in the glee club and on athletic teams. Substantial minority group representation, of course, does not guarantee intergroup harmony, but it is clearly a prerequisite for integration. (Pettigrew 1974)

Rist also concludes that ". . . black students who serve as tokens in a white milieu tend to suffer" (Rist 1978: 263).

The suffering of small numbers of African American children reluctantly brought in to integrate schools may generate sympathy. But the adult placed in the role of token is subject to suspicion and disapproval from members of his/her own group. He or she may be in conflict over the desire to preserve individual position and security, to benefit the group, and the interrelationships between these two goals.[1]

Suffering or stress is a natural consequence of the dilemmas and paradoxes inherent in playing or resisting the token role. Entry into it

constitutes a breakthrough against prior exclusion, and a relative gain in status for the chosen individual. At the same time the actor becomes part of a production staged to serve organizational purposes in the face of external and internal pressures. In our delineation of the ideal type token role we expand upon these themes.

Dilemmas also exist for the token's group. The token's appointment may be thought of initially as a wedge for others, an advance. At the same time there is fear that the token will abandon the group. The concepts of cooptation and marginality are relevant here. One definition of cooptation suggests that real power is being shared: "Co-optation has been defined as the process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy-determining structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence" (Thompson & McEwen 1961: 194).

But cooptation is frequently employed in a more perjorative sense, to describe the neutralization of potential leaders through their absorption into official structures.[2] From the viewpoint of some factions in the African-American community, the token may be seen as a "Neo-Uncle Tom" (Ottley 1943: 217). Laws describes the token woman in the university academic department as an essentially compromise role (1975). Why this is so will become clearer in our later treatment of the token role.

The concept of marginality is also useful here. In a seminal essay first published in 1945, Everett C. Hughes dealt with the entrance of new types of people into more desirable occupational statuses. Hughes (1958) asserted that master status-determining characteristics such as race or sex are salient in every context, and that the White Protestant male is the desired or expected type for most higher status positions in the society. Race and sex constitute auxiliary status characteristics when

not formally designated as requirements for position, and are significantly attended to. The non-expected type of person is marginal because of the two conflicting statuses he/she has--the formal occupational one and the other inappropriate, auxiliary status. To act like a true "Brother" or as a university administrator will, for example, require different types of behavior. The marginality of this individual with conflicting statuses was likened to Park's racially marginal person, the "hybrid" product of two different racial groups (Hughes 1958).[3]

Tokenism and Progress

An important and heretofore unaddressed question must be raised. How does one distinguish between tokenism and significant progress? Members of formerly excluded groups may be expected to define as tokenism many more situations than do dominant group members; the latter may be expected to overestimate progress. The latter may protest that every change can be challenged as tokenism. True, short of changing the entire system every gesture can be seen as inadequate by the oppressed. The argument is taken to its logical conclusion in the writings of Fanon (1966). In advocating the violent overthrow of colonialism, Fanon asserts that only by totally replacing the colonizers with the colonized can the "native" be rid of the mentality and habit of oppression.

We can provide no ultimate answer to this question. However we believe that it is possible to develop empirical models by which tokenism and the use of tokens can be measured. In what follows we propose key elements which constitute the essence of the token role. To the extent that concrete cases conform to the interrelated elements of this model they can be assessed as high or low in a tokenism scale. Research in

differing organizational contexts will provide the data needed to modify our formulations. For illustration we use the university, drawing upon everyday experiences of ourselves, our colleagues and students as well as student newspapers and other internal publications of universities. These examples, we are sure, are replicated elsewhere. We also rely heavily on the literature cited earlier, especially the work of Hughes, Kanter, and Laws.

The Token: Elements of an Ideal Type

It should be emphasized that, in what follows, the token role is characterized, not the individual who is placed in this role. Individuals do not necessarily embrace their roles (Goffman 1961). The latitude allowed for individual role interpretation and expansion varies widely, but the individual who fully embraces the token role becomes, thereby, a true token. The person who, once placed in such a role, tries to resist or reinterpret it, by whatever means, is doing what those in disadvantaged positions have always done.[4] That is, they use cunning, indirection, sabotage, revolutionary judos etc., to contravene what the master wants.

The token does not ordinarily rise in the organizational hierarchy, for many if not all elements of the role inhibit mobility. The ideology of subordinate group inadequacy is thus perpetuated by the token's seeming lack of ability to succeed. Here then is the ideal type:

1. The token is a numerical and/or proportional rarity in the situational context. Kanter (1977) emphasizes the importance of numbers for token status, seeing as skewed or token situations those in which the proportion of dominants to minorities is at least 85:15. For this author, numbers alone drastically affect the behavior of tokens and others.

However, solo individuals in a given setting whose societal status is high (e.g. the white male) tend to dominate or rise quickly to the top, in which case they are not tokens. The emergence of what may be called a "pseudo-token" role can occur as a result of Affirmative Action, when white academics seem to assume token roles in traditionally African American colleges.[5]

The universities' scramble for Black faculty when it suddenly became popular involved the raiding of such traditionally Black institutions, the elevation of African American graduate students from part-time T.A. slots to full-time but poorly paid teaching positions, and the consequent appearance of small numbers of Blacks scattered throughout various university departments. African Americans were sometimes hired essentially as researchers and assigned "field positions" and functions with research adventures conducted in urban communities, ones that their White colleagues --the principal investigators--preferred to delegate.

2. The token is highly visible, both because of human perceptual tendencies associated with proportional rarity, and to serve the more conscious purpose of show and display (Kanter 1977; Hughes 1958; Laws 1975). The token tends to be public and weak rather than obscure and strong. His or her appearance is required at many ceremonial occasions, regardless of whether or not such appearance is logically related to the position (Cobb & Elder 1972; Kanter 1977; Laws 1975; Ross 1973). Visibility permits observation of role performance by those above in order to control and by those below in order to scrutinize loyalties. Obviously the more visibility a position entails, the less opportunity to relax or deviate from role requirements.

The token in the university is required to integrate many sub-groups,

such as academic committees--with one individual sufficing for many committees. This tendency is reinforced by the demands of his or her constituency for representation as well as the token's own sense of duty.

3. Special tasks and/or titles are allocated to the token position. The title is impressive, as a form of appeasement, but the position has little power (Cobb & Elder 1972; Kanter 1977). Administrative titles are often a give-away: note such examples as Assistant Dean in Charge of Minority Affairs, Community Relations Specialist, Director of Sex-Desegregation (Ross 1973).

Services are geared to the individual's own group, so that the token can play a buffer role. The nature of the duties are such that significant members of the dominant group do not fall under the direct authority of the token; for example some white professors find it difficult to serve on doctoral dissertation committees chaired by African American colleagues. It is apparently less important if poor White students find themselves in programs served by African-American administrators.

In variations of the above, the token is given an established position from which more important duties have been removed. This prevents acquisition of power or learning of skills which might enhance mobility. Racial minority members are spared contacts or situations "which might embarrass them," even though such situations are essential to the job. (One remembers the earlier struggles of Black professionals to get hotel accommodations at convention hotels.)

The token is expected to be a specialist in knowledge about his or her own group. He or she may be brought into the university world

precisely to teach about and do research on this group. Racial and ethnic studies, "less traditional fields," have low prestige--making the minority academician appear to be substandard. The assignment of special duties or courses related to one's race or sex is part of what Kantor calls "role encapsulation"--the tendency to force tokens into playing limited and caricatured roles (1977: 230).

4. The token is treated as an exception who does not have all the negative traits associated with his/her own group (Laws 1975). Once selected the token is expected to affirm that the selection was based on merit. By allowing himself/herself to be treated as an exception, the individual acknowledges the defects of other members of the group and their lack of comparable qualifications. This serves the organization's purpose of limiting access to others. In the setting the token may adopt a manner of dress and speech similar to that of the dominants.

5. Paradoxically, the token is also treated as a symbol of the group. The deviant characteristics of the token are master status determining traits which retain salience and are taken into account along with job-related performance (Hughes 1958). Although told that his/her performance is a test case, the token is judged by different standards than are the "normals." Undue emphasis is placed on the personal characteristics and personality of the token. African-American males, for example, are accused of flirtation or sexual dalliance where similar behavior on the part of White males would be ignored.

The token accepts the group's attention to minority traits by not taking offense and by assuming stereotyped roles. (For examples of gender and race-related symbolic roles see Kanter 1977 and Dumas 1976). The token faces personal questions about sexual or grooming habits and accepts

responsibility for educating others about his/her own group.

6. The token tends to be isolated socially, both from the dominant group and members of his/her own group. The token serves to remind dominants of their own sameness, heightening social boundaries (Kanter 1977). Although the presence of tokens is demanded in many official settings, they tend to be excluded from the "inner circle"--the networks of informal communication where decision-making occurs and know-how is passed along. Partly because of this as well as their differentness, they are not trusted to behave according to the commonly accepted informal practices of dominant institutions. They are made aware that dominants cannot act normally in their presence. Such presence violates the more traditional pattern of "ethnic lock" wherein inclusion is determined by race and ethnicity.

The token is suspect by members of his/her own group by virtue of having become part of the establishment. Such social distance is not always unwelcome, since it protects against excessive pressures and demands. However, it may also mitigate against needed group support.

7. As suggested above, excessive and unusual demands are made on the token both from the dominants and members of the token's own group. The new African American faculty members brought hastily into predominantly white universities often held combination teaching/administrative positions, and were obligated to rush to any emergency (academic or not) involving African American students. Counselling and advising of these students was required far beyond what is usually required for other professionals. Such demands left little time for the scholarly activities necessary for the attainment of tenure and promotion. Required to champion their constituents, the token might be placed in opposition to

his or her own superiors--or be used excessively by them in efforts to placate students.

8. A token-sponsor relationship helps to get the token's career going. Ideally the token is part of a dyad which includes a sponsor from the dominant group. But sponsorship occurs most easily homosocially and the sponsorship of tokens has special features--like expecting gratitude for normal courtesies and opportunities. While appearing to be liberal, the sponsor views the token both as an exception and as one who may be expected to assume aspects of his/her traditional role. Or the sponsorship role may end abruptly once a new Black faculty member has been lured to the university.

9. The token must demonstrate loyalty to the system's values and protect it. The minority group member is called upon as a spokesperson to proclaim the liberalism and lack of discrimination of the organization; to do the necessary "dirty work" in relationships with his/her own group as suggested earlier. As a loyal token, the minority group member must be grateful and not press the organization for further advantages.

10. The token role is obviously self-perpetuating (Laws 1975). Playing the role requires that the system not be challenged and that limited personal gains be accepted. This fulfills the original purpose of tokenism--to limit further inroads on the part of the token's group. The individual who does not properly play the role will be replaced by another token. However the demands of the role are so great that the token minority group member may leave of his/her own accord.

Conclusion

The phenomena of tokenism was explored as a neglected area of theory in the sociology of race relations. Various conceptualizations of tokenism were presented which stressed its use by dominants as an accommodation to minority group pressures for change. Thus, tokenism was seen to come into play at particular stages in race relations. Dilemmas of the token role, both for the individual and the group, were discussed. An ideal type of the token role was proposed as a basis for further research and analysis, using the university as an illustrative source.

The past record of organizational change to eliminate the structures of racism and sexism in predominantly White institutions of higher education is not encouraging. If the past is a key to the future, the future does not appear to be less bleak. With low demand and excess supply, academia will have greater flexibility which, in turn, will make it easier to disguise discriminatory practices. Continued refinement and application of the proposed ideal-type of the token role should contribute to the extension of race relations theory, and serve as part of a thrust to assault the ideological hegemony of racism and sexism in higher education.

Further intriguing questions remain. For example, will the addition of greater numbers from the token's group eliminate tokenism? If so, what developments occur next--the withdrawal of dominants from the scene, regroupings within the structure, or possible elimination of the desegregated organization itself? These questions are left for speculation and study.

Notes

1. See Dumas 1976 for a sympathetic account of the dilemmas of African American women in organizational leadership positions and Woodward 1978 on reducing stress on African American administrators.

2. In the case of colonialization, colonizers may attempt to create a buffer group of somewhat privileged "natives" who will have a vested interest in their relatively greater status and advantages.

3. More recent analyses of women's role-playing in work settings draws upon Hughes' insight in describing the continuing shift between gender and occupational behavior (Laws 1975).

4. This was pointed out by Professor Setsuko Nishi.

5. For some exploratory analysis of this idea see Jacques 1980.

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